

17 March 2025

London Borough of Camden  
Development Management Team  
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FAO Elaine Quigley and Catherine Bond

Dear Officers

## **Listed Building Consent Application | Temporary desks within the Great Court, British Museum, London WC1B**

### **Introduction and background**

Enclosed is an application for listed building consent made on behalf of The British Museum. It proposes the temporary retention of two linear desks (Ticketing and Membership on the East, Guide Desk on the West), located within the Great Court of the Grade I listed Museum, Great Russell Street, London WC1B.

The two desks, on the southeast and southwest sides of the Great Court, were originally granted listed building consent in 2007, with subsequent permissions to retain them being granted since. The latest temporary permission (granted in 2023) will expire soon ref: 2021/2162/L.

There have been a number of discussions with Officers on the evolving need for these desks. The Museum understands that Officers' preference would be for the desks to be removed and/or tied into a re-evaluation of the much wider visitor orientation and wayfinding strategy for the whole site. This could include considering alternatives to physical structures within the Great Court, assessing the function of particular spaces and exploring potential technological solutions. The Museum has taken officers' feedback to date onboard and will ensure these considerations are integrated into any new design solution.

The Museum remains deeply committed to carrying out these essential wider assessment studies to find a long term solution, as part of a comprehensive site-wide masterplan approach. Since seeking the previous consent, the Museum has reopened the Round Reading Room to the public and is currently implementing the Masterplan strategy to keep the Museum at the forefront of the great museums in the world. This includes the Energy Centre Programme (ECP), new Visitor Welcome Pavilions (VWP) and the Western Range (WR) project. All of these projects will impact on the operations of the Museum and they will be looking at strategies to improve the Great Court as part of the Western Range Project in a holistic way. As part of the Western Range project, the Museum will be exploring how the Great Court and Reading Room are used in the interim period in a holistic way. The ticket desks will be assessed as part of this interim solution for the Great Court.

However, this means that the role and function of the existing desks remain vital to the current visitor orientation and circulation over the next few years while a more holistic plan is drawn up. The Museum would, therefore, like to request a realistic time frame to avoid further temporary applications. After much careful deliberation, they consider that a 3-year period is likely to be the most realistic to prevent the need for a recurring application in a shorter timeframe.

Regular discussions with the Head of Development Management at London Borough of Camden (LBC) on the Masterplan projects are taking place. The need to retain these desks and to apply for a further consent has been raised and discussed in principle. The officers requested for the justifications to be set out in the application which have been included in this letter.

An additional 3 years for the retention of the desks would enable the Museum to undertake the comprehensive review that is required across the whole site, as part of the ambitions to progress a wider plan for the estate. Until this is progressed, it is essential that the existing desks can remain in support of the primary function of the Museum to welcome and meet visitors' needs, as a world class attraction.

### **Application content**

This application has been submitted via the Planning Portal (ref: PP-13830263). This letter provides the planning justification and background. The following also forms the submission and supporting documents:

- Application form
- Location Plan at scale 1:1250 and Block Plan at scale 1:500 which are also the existing and proposed plan prepared by Purcell
- Approved Design and Access Statement (DAS) and Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) prepared by Purcell in 2018. As the design of the desks will not change, the details outlined in this document remain relevant.

There is no planning administration fee required for this listed building consent application. The CIL Questions are included. The development is not liable for CIL as the proposals are temporary and there is no uplift in floorspace.

### **British Museum site**

The British Museum is one of the UK's top visitor attractions. It was founded in 1753, the first national public museum in the world, and has been open to the public since 1759. With approximately eight million objects in the collection, it is one of the world's greatest display of human history, culture and art. Both permanent collections and special exhibitions are presented within displays for the public.

The Museum's Bloomsbury estate is situated on the north side of Great Russell Street within the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. It is bounded by Montague Place, Montague Street, Bloomsbury Street and Great Russell Street. This houses a number of important listed buildings, including the Grade I listed quadrangle Museum building in which the Great Court sits. The original elements of this building date from 1823-47 and were built to the designs of Robert Smirke. The building consists of two principal storeys, adhering to the Greek Revival style, which also includes the columns and pediment at the South entrance.

The Great Court is positioned within the heart of the Bloomsbury estate. It was adapted to the designs of Lord Norman Foster in 2000, creating a central glass covered space around the Sidney Smirke designed Reading Room (dated 1852-57).

The number of visitors to the Museum has grown significantly in the years since the Great Court was opened and the commencement of large-scale special exhibition programmes (from c. 4.48 million in 2005-2006 to c.6.2 million in 2023/24). The Great Court forms the main focal point and orientation point for these visitors, entering the site from Great Russell Street and Montague Street.

A detailed appraisal of the significance of the Museum as a whole is set out in the updated Conservation Plan prepared by Purcell, dated 2024. The Conservation Plan highlights that the Museum represents the high point of neo-classical Museum style in the UK. The estate is of international significance and of considerable social value attributed to its use as a Museum and the importance of its collections. To remain a world class institution the Museum must continue to develop. The Conservation Plan also notes that the Great Court is the 'heart' of Smirke's major wings, especially following Lord Foster's adaption. Further information on the historical development of the Museum, including a summary of the impact on heritage set out in the original HIA by Purcell, re-submitted with this application.

**Surrounding uses** | These include a range of commercial office, hotel and education uses. The site is located within an area of excellent transport accessibility with a PTAL rating of 6b. It is close to Russell Square, Holborn, Tottenham Court Road and Goodge Street tube stations, several bus routes operate along Southampton Row and Bloomsbury Street. There are cycle networks in close proximity with secure bike stands. There is a Santander bike hire stand towards the junction between Great Russell Street and Montague Street. The Museum is located in the Midtown BID district (Holborn, Bloomsbury, St Giles), an Archaeological Priority Area, the Background Strategy View (Blackheath), and the Central Activity Zone (CAZ).

## Related planning history

- **Ref: 2007/2934/L** | The two audio guide and ticket sales desks that BM wish to retain as part of this application were first approved in August 2007, as part of a wider application for the use of the Round Reading Room as a temporary exhibition space (in connection with the 'First Emperor' exhibition of the terracotta warriors). These desks were originally required to aid ticket sales and provide retail opportunities for this exhibition, and to support the two permanent information desks already in situ, which were not sufficient to serve the increased visitor demand. A condition was imposed allowing the desks to be in place for one year with the desks to be removed at the end of the exhibition.
- **Ref: 2008/1376/L** | This exhibition and use of the Reading Room as a temporary exhibition space was a great success and provided a much-needed interim solution for the Museum's growing special exhibitions programme. BM therefore applied for a further listed building consent seeking the retention of the temporary ticket and retail desks until July 2012. This space was granted in July 2008.
- **Ref: 2011/0605/P** | Another extension of the temporary consent for the ticket desks was granted on 4 April 2011, permitting the retention of the desks until October 2014. At this time, BM had announced that it was to build a purpose-built special exhibitions gallery in the World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre (WCEC). This was anticipated to be ready to house future temporary exhibitions in 2014. The new special exhibition space in the WCEC (now called the Sainsbury Exhibition Gallery) fulfils the Museum's requirements for a large, flexible and permanent space for temporary exhibitions. The temporary work carried out in the former Reading Room, forming the raised floor and surrounding fabric, was subsequently removed and the space reinstated to its 2006 appearance. However, the temporary ticket and retail desks in the Great Court, originally granted in association with the Reading Room exhibition space, had become critically important to the function of museum operations far beyond their original intended purpose associated with the Reading Room.
- **Ref : 2015/1094/L** | The continued need for the two desks was acknowledged in the listed building consent, granted in July 2015. This allowed a further three-year extension, to July 2018. This was justified due to the growth in the number of special exhibitions and audio guides users.
- **Ref: 2018/4833/L** | In 2018, the desks was granted for a further 2 years from 2019 to 2021. A visitor strategy was proposed to be submitted. These were approved in the absence of a middle to long term strategy. The consent also allowed minor modifications to the desks to incorporate storage, but these were not implemented.
- **Ref: 2021/2162/L** | The last permission allowed for the same desks to remain in situ for a further 2 years from April 2023 to April 2025. This consent is about to expire and therefore the Museum wishes to seek consent for a further 3 years.

## Proposals

The Museum is seeking to retain the southeast and southwest Ticketing/Membership and Guides desks for 3 years, until May 2028. The existing desks will remain in situ without any changes. The need and use for the desks are outlined below. Any lesser period than 3 years is unlikely to be sufficient for the Museum to realistically find an alternative solution to replace the important visitor function that the desks perform.

**Need and use** | A detailed account of the continued and pressing need of the temporary desks is provided in the DAS and HIA prepared by Purcell in the 2018 documentation. This has not changed since this submission (albeit there is an even greater need aligned with management of the space) and remains important. The Purcell document confirms the specific function of the desks, which are relied upon to service the varied needs of the circa 6.2 million visitors per year that visit the Museum, most of whom are first time visitors. In addition, with the masterplan projects progressing around the museum, it is even more important that these desks remain to maintain some consistency during a period of change.

The desk located on the south eastern edge of the Great Court is used for: Ticketing for temporary exhibitions and Membership

- Selling tickets for special exhibitions, films, events and lectures (the only public, physical location in the Museum where these can be purchased and/or collected);
- Ticket collection and filming permit collection point; and
- A dedicated point for visitors to become members, or for the existing 77,000 members to access information.

The desk on the southwestern edge of the Great Court is used for: Guides (Physical and digital)

- Hiring digital app based audio guides (12,000 downloads per month from desk QR codes); and offering aid to direct visitors around the large and otherwise difficult to navigate museum and its galleries; and
- Providing accessibility guides for visitors who are visual impaired or require visual signing rather than audio guides.
- Selling physical guides in 12 languages, maps and other devices to improve visitor journey

The audio guides are popular with non-English speaking visitors, accounting for approximately 75% of the visitors to the Museum. The majority expect interpretation in other languages to be provided. The equipment itself is quite bulky and can take up quite a lot of space; they and therefore need a designated place to be distributed and stored and a place to maintain and refurbish the technology to ensure its availability to the public.

Both desks are currently used in conjunction with the two permanent information and families desks also located within the Great Court. The main function of these desks differs from the temporary desks – the south-east desk is the primary orientation point and place for all visitors to access general information or make enquiries. They hold hard-copy visitors guides; and are a point for lost property. The southwest desk is used by families to pick up guides containing specific information on family friendly activities and events within the Museum. There are regular queues of people at the permanent desks, particularly during school holidays even with all desks in operation at the same time.

**Design** | The temporary desks in situ have been designed to complement the physical appearance, materials and style of the two permanent desks that were approved as part of the Foster designed Great Court refurbishment scheme. They have a clean and simple aesthetic. They are rectangular in shape with a public counter and desk behind which the Museum's staff can sit to serve visitors. An information panel behind the desk displays public information. The desks are completely freestanding, they rest on the existing stone floor with no physical attachment to the fabric of the building. They are located along the southeast and southwest walls of the Great Court, so as to be clearly visible to visitors who require information from them, without being an obstruction to walking routes or pedestrian flows.

### **Planning framework**

The policies within The National Planning Policy Framework 2024 (NPPF) (including the NPPG); and the Development Plan form material considerations in the determination of this application. The Development Plan is formed of GLA's London Plan (LP) 2021 and the Camden Local Plan adopted in July 2017. These documents are supported by Camden's Planning Guidance Note on Design; and the Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal 2011. Relevant policies include NPPF Section 16; London Plan policy HC1; and LBC LP policies D1, D2.

### **Assessment of work**

A review of the heritage policy that is relevant to the determination of this application is set out in the HIA by Purcell and is not, therefore, repeated in detail here. Please refer to Supporting Document ' Design and Access Statement & Heritage Impact Assessment for the temporary ticketing and audio guide desks:

**Policy summary** | The NPPF advocates that where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. It also sets out that account should be taken of the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets, putting them into viable uses consistent with their conservation. Development should preserve or enhances the historic environment and heritage assets and resist development that would cause harm to significance of a listed building through an effect on its setting in accordance with Policy D1 Design and D2 Heritage of the Camden Local Plan.

**Proposed desks** | The Museum is a Grade I listed building of international significance. Its special architectural and historic character can in part be attributed to the significance of its collection and the considerable social value attributed to its use as a Museum; containing of some of the world's most valuable and coveted collection of ancient artefacts. The Museum must be able to serve the needs of its visitors: this is its primary function.

The audio guide and ticketing desks have been part of the Great Court since 2007. They are now firmly integrated into the Museum's daily operations and become integral furniture of the Great Court as first time visitors attempt to navigate the vast estate; and more frequent visitors, more familiar with the building, head to the designated spot where they expect to source information. They support the smooth functioning of the visitor experience. The public benefits of the continued and sustained use of these desks are substantial.

Of note, 50% of the circa 6.2 million visitors enter the building (in peak years) via Great Russell Street and it has been recognised that most of the visitors go straight into the Great Court. The remaining 50% of visitors use the Montague Place entrance, which also leads to the Great Court. This makes the existing desks relevant and accessible to almost all visitors. Once in the Great Court, visitors expect to access information and services in relation to their visit and purchase tickets easily in this space. The temporary desks are, therefore, an essential part of the daily function and operations of this space and the Museum as a whole.

The desks are free standing structures. The desks are removable and do not have any long-term physical impact on the listed fabric. They are not fixed to the fabric and can be removed as a fully reversible proposal if their use becomes redundant in the future; for example, when the Museum has been able to consider its wider wayfinding strategy across the whole estate. The desks are of a similar scale to the existing information desks and have been sized to be visible to the public visitors, but are considered to be relatively small in scale in comparison to the Great Court in which they are housed.

It is acknowledged in Purcell's heritage impact assessment that the Great Court is of outstanding architectural merit, contributing to its grading as a Grade I listed building. However, it is also the British Museum's main visitor circulation space and has a clear functional remit that is also of significance in the context of the function of the museum use and the public access to the collection. The structures do not block any special architectural detailing, and only a very small section of the wall that is behind them. It concludes that the desks will cause a low impact on the wider setting of the Great Court, however the minor harm is far outweighed by the public benefits accrued from their retention. The design of the desks will not change. These desks also help to manage spikes in attendance at peak times, thereby improving efficiency and running of operations.

The number of visitors has grown since they were originally installed, and similarly the importance of ticketed exhibitions has also grown. It would have a negative impact on visitors' experience if these desks are removed at this time, as it would hinder visitor access to the exhibitions and increase congestion. These desks are fully embedded into the current visitors management strategy which will take time and resources for the Museum to manage and update.

## **Summary and conclusion**

The British Museum is working on improving the visitor experience to cater for the increasing number of visitors. The retention of the desks in situ for 3 years to May 2028 would afford time for the Museum to prioritise work on its ambitions to address a long term solution for the comprehensive estate especially with the works to the Western Range coming forward, which would include reviewing alternative solutions of these desks as part of a comprehensive approach.

## **Anticipated programme:**

- **2025-2028** – Western Range (WR) RIBA 2 is progressed, and Great Court design is developed, this will include re-thinking the existing ticket desks as part of the re-presentation of the Great Court during the Western Range works.
- **2028** – Apply for new temporary consent for Great Court design for the period while WR is being decanted / in construction (length of consent would be TBC, but likely in place until WR completion in 2035).
- **2028-2035** – The Museum will be exploring how visitor functions could be located within permanent visitor facilities within the Visitor Welcome Programme (Workstream 3-4)

The need for these desks has proved essential over time as the number of visitors has grown significantly since the Great Court was first opened. Since the commencement of large-scale special exhibitions, the demand for services – information, access to family packs, hard-copy visitor guides, tickets for special exhibitions, membership services, and the various multimedia audio guides has grown in proportion to the increased visitor numbers. All of this is also in parallel to an expanding special exhibitions programme, i.e. the number of ticketed events has also increased significantly with several different exhibitions running at any one time. Overall, the desks have become important furniture in the Great Court to accommodate the visitors' needs. Further, the desks support the Museum's ability to generate revenue that helps it continue to reinvest in the Grade I listed estate.

The desks are high quality and well-designed installations which will continue to support the daily functions of the Museum. The desks will not cause any impact on the listed status of the building and its setting. Overall, the proposal will support the Museum's function and thus enhances its international important status. The proposals will also enhance the historic interest of the building and therefore comply with the local and national policies.

If you have any questions, please contact Vicky Cartwright or Shonagh Ramsey at [shonagh@theplanninglab.com](mailto:shonagh@theplanninglab.com) call the office on 020 7257 9363.

Yours faithfully

**The Planning Lab**